Notional Syllabuses

D.A. Wilkins

Oxford University Press

Notional Syllabuses

A taxonomy and its relevance to foreign language curriculum development

D. A. WILKINS

Department of Linguistic Science
University of Reading

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

OXFORD LONDON
NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE AUCKLAND
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE HONG KONG TOKYO
DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI
NAIROBI DAR ES SALAAM CAPE TOWN

and associated companies in
BEIRUT BERLIN IBADAN MEXICO CITY NICOSIA

OXFORD is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

ISBN 0 19 437071 2

First Published 1976

Seventh impression 1985

Printed in Hong Kong

Notional Syllabuses

For Roberta
and
Brigid, Alison and Jonathan

Preface

That this book is published at all is a sign of the widespread interest that the ideas it contains have already aroused. These ideas have gained some currency since they were first presented in a set of working documents of the Council of Europe and in various conference papers.[1] I was conscious at the time of the essentially interim nature of the proposals and I knew that many years of linguistic and pedagogic research would be needed before the ideas could be put forward with the authority necessary for a more substantial form of publication. For this reason I did not at the time offer the papers for general publication. If I have now changed my mind, it is because so much interest has been shown and because I am told that many people are already trying to put the ideas into practice. The original articles are not easily obtainable and in any case the central paper was not aimed at a general readership and is not entirely understandable as it stands. When I was approached by the Oxford University Press, I agreed to publication of this work in the hope that it would succeed in stimulating thought and thoughtful experimentation in the field of syllabus design. Certain modifications have been made to the framework of categories which are proposed for the construction of notional syllabuses and the justification for a notional syllabus, which makes up the first chapter, relates the issue much more explicitly to general aspects of syllabus design than was the case in the previous work. The final chapter is wholly new and attempts to explore the role of a notional syllabus in various types of language learning situations.

A work of this kind can never be the product of one person's research. I owe far more to others than I can possibly indicate. I must, in particular mention the Council of Europe which commissioned the original study on which this book is based, Jan van Ek, René Richterich

---

[1] D.A.Wilkins: 'The linguistic and situational content of the common core in a unit/credit system.' In *Systems Development in Adult Language Learning.* Strasbourg. Council of Europe. 1973.

D.A.Wilkins: 'Grammatical, situational and notional syllabuses.' In *Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Applied Linguistics.* Volume 2. A. Verdoodt (ed.). Heidelberg. Julius Groos. 1974.

D.A.Wilkins: 'Notional syllabuses and the concept of a minimum adequate grammar.' In Corder S.P. and E. Roulet (eds.): *Linguistic Insights in Applied Linguistics.* Brussels, AIMAV. Paris. Didier. 1974.

and John Trim, my colleagues on the Council of Europe committee, who encouraged me when I first put my ideas forward, and Chris Candlin and Henry Widdowson much of whose thinking I found to be similar to my own and from whom I have learned a good deal. Knowledgeable readers will be aware that some text-book writers and practising language teachers had already been working in a similar direction. I regard my own contribution as having been principally to have provided a taxonomy through which semantically oriented language teaching can be systematically planned and, secondarily, to have helped to revise our understanding of the nature of language learning and teaching in the light of these innovations.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Approaches to Language Syllabus Design

1.0 Introduction: synthesis and analysis

One of the major decisions that has to be taken in the teaching of foreign languages is on what basis we will select the language to which the learner will be exposed and which we will expect him to acquire. If we look at existing text-books, at existing syllabuses and at the discussions that have been conducted in journals and books devoted to the teaching of languages, we will see that a variety of approaches have been proposed or adopted. In the case of older text-books decisions appear to have been taken on a more or less subjective basis, whereas in more recent years the criteria employed have been made more and more explicit. To a considerable extent the different ways of structuring courses reflect different ways of looking at the objectives of language learning and teaching. If a close analysis of objectives has been made, the most obvious pedagogic strategy to adopt in planning to meet those objectives is to follow the components of the analysis step-by-step. Since the learning of a language is most commonly identified with acquiring mastery of its grammatical system, it is not surprising that most courses have a grammatical (or 'structural') pedagogic organisation. Of course there is enormous variety in the ways in which language may be presented in grammatically structured teaching materials themselves, but there are also quite other ways of defining the content of language courses. There are courses based on the systematic introduction of vocabulary and others which take language situations as the starting-point. There are those that adopt a functional approach that resembles parts of the notional syllabus that is to be proposed here. The attempt has also been made to give an operational definition to the objectives of language learning and to plan courses accordingly.

While admitting that in practice these approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, regarding them from the linguistic point of view, I would wish to argue that they can be grouped into two conceptually distinct types of approach which could be labelled *synthetic* and *analytic*. Any actual course or syllabus could be placed somewhere on the continuum between the wholly synthetic and the

wholly analytic, but the actual decision procedures that have been followed in the process of selection will show that it tends towards one pole or the other.

A synthetic language teaching strategy is one in which the different parts of language are taught separately and step-by-step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of the parts until the whole structure of the language has been built up. In planning the syllabus for such teaching the global language has been broken down probably into an inventory of grammatical structures and into a limited list of lexical items. These are ordered according to criteria which are discussed in the next section. At any one time the learner is being exposed to a deliberately limited sample of language. The language that is mastered in one unit of learning is added to that which has been acquired in the preceding units. The learner's task is to re-synthesize the language that has been broken down into a large number of smaller pieces with the aim of making his learning easier. It is only in the final stages of learning that the global language is re-established in all its structural diversity.

In analytic approaches there is no attempt at this careful linguistic control of the learning environment. Components of language are not seen as building blocks which have to be progressively accumulated. Much greater variety of linguistic structure is permitted from the beginning and the learner's task is to approximate his own linguistic behaviour more and more closely to the global language. Significant linguistic forms can be isolated from the structurally heterogeneous context in which they occur, so that learning can be focussed on important aspects of the language structure. It is this process which is referred to as analytic. In general, however, structural considerations are secondary when decisions are being taken about the way in which the language to which the learner will be exposed is to be selected and organized. The situational, notional and functional syllabuses described below (pp 15–20) are analytic in this sense, as are approaches based on operational definitions.

2.0 Synthetic approaches

The majority of language courses and syllabuses are and probably always have been constructed on synthetic lines. Language learning is a complex task. However, a complex task can usually be broken down into a series of simpler tasks. In recent years and particularly under the influence of advances in the psychology of learning the identification of the smaller learning tasks has been carried out with increasing

linguistic sophistication. The tasks are identified with items derived from the description of the language. In those courses which are commonly labelled 'traditional' the control of new linguistic items introduced in any one text-book lesson or unit was not particularly strict. Whole paradigms were presented at a time and often quite distinct linguistic structures would be treated in the same lesson. In the last twenty years or so the use made by structural linguists of the technique of minimal contrast as a criterion for identifying distinct linguistic structures has encouraged text-book writers and syllabus constructors to simplify the learning task still further by reducing to a minimum the quantity of new language in any learning unit. As a result the same learning content is spread over more units and a longer period of time. However, although there is now much more explicit recognition of the criteria that are involved in this process of selecting and ordering language, the learning principle that underlies both types of text remains the same. You facilitate learning if you present the learner with pieces of language that have been pre-digested according to the categories found in a description of the language.

I should add too that matters of method and the exact form in which the new language is presented are not in question here. There are, of course, some very real differences. A new linguistic structure may be presented in the form of an explicit rule; it may be presented as a paradigm; it may be embedded in a dialogue; it may occur in a series of analogous sentences intended to promote inductive learning. None of these differences is relevant to the discussion here. If the content of teaching is in the first place a limitation and an ordering of the forms of the linguistic system, the approach is synthetic.

As methods of teaching have changed, so have the processes by which language is selected and graded. In the case of older text-books decisions appear to have been taken on a more or less subjective basis. At least there is very little discussion of the criteria that were employed. In contrast, the language teaching literature of the past thirty years or so is full of discussions of the various factors to be taken into consideration in deciding which forms of language were to be taught and in which order. This is not the place for a critical and detailed review of the literature on this topic, but a brief discussion of the criteria that have been proposed will be useful since it will be necessary to mention some of them later.

Although in most modern courses control of vocabulary and of grammatical structure go hand-in-hand, the attention of methodologists was first directed to vocabulary. This was presumably because the vocabulary that is needed for predictable day-to-day use of language

was markedly different from the somewhat literary and arbitrary vocabulary that learners actually met in their predominantly reading-based courses. It was felt that ways should be found of ensuring that the vocabulary learned should be less haphazardly distributed, more in keeping with the likely needs of the learners and not so large as to constitute a severe learning burden. The aim was to see that the vocabulary content of courses consisted of, in short, the most *useful* words.

The criteria that have been used in establishing the relative usefulness of words are *frequency*[1], *range*[2], *availability*[3], *familiarity*[4] and *coverage*[5]. The notion of *frequency* is self-evident. *Range* relates to the distribution of a lexical item over a number of different types of text. *Availability* (*disponibilité*) accounts for lexical items which may not be particularly frequent but which are readily available to the speaker when he needs them. As with *familiarity* it is measured by means of speakers' responses rather than by the statistical analysis of texts. In establishing the availability of lexical items subjects are asked to to list the words which they would find most useful in certain defined areas of interest. The degree of familiarity of an item is assessed by asking the subjects to rank words in a given list on a familiarity scale. The *coverage* of a lexical item is rated high if it expresses a range of meanings or is capable of replacing other items of more specific meaning in particular contexts.

Pedagogic considerations are not ignored in the process of selection. Some items will be promoted because they are particularly useful in

---

[1] The following works deal in some detail with vocabulary control in general and frequency in particular:

H.Bongers: *The History and Principles of Vocabulary Control.* Wocopi. Woerden. 1947.

Committee on Vocabulary Selection: *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection.* London. King. 1936.

L.K.Engels: The fallacy of word-counts. IRAL 6/3 1968

C.C.Fries and A.A.Traver: *English Word Lists.* Ann Arbor. University of Michigan. 1950.

M.A.K.Halliday, A.McIntosh and P.D.Strevens: *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching.* London. Longman. 1964. Chapter 7.

A.S.Hornby: Vocabulary control – history and principles. ELT 8/1 1953.

W.R.Lee: Grading. ELT 17/3, 17/4, 18/2. 1962/63.

W.F.Mackey: *Language Teaching Analysis.* London. Longman 1965.

[2] Committee on Vocabulary Selection: *ibid.*

[3] Institut Pédagogique National: *Le Français Fondamental.* (1er degré) Paris.

R.Michéa: Mots fréquents et mots disponibles. *Les Langues Modernes.* 47.

[4] J.C.Richards: A psycholinguistic measure of vocabulary selection. IRAL 8/2 1970.

[5] W.F.Mackey and J.G.Savard: The indices of coverage: a new dimension in lexicometrics. IRAL 5/2 & 3. 1967.

I.A.Richards: *Basic English and its Uses.* London. Kegan Paul. 1943.

the classroom situation. Others will be assessed for their teachability in the light of the techniques for teaching meaning that the teacher wishes to employ. Insistence on the use of ostensive procedures, for example, will make it very difficult to teach some items in the early stages. Again, an item might be deferred where comparison with the mother-tongue suggests that it might present an exceptional degree of difficulty.

As Reibel observes, what is happening here is that we are taking the language behaviour and the language knowledge that we aim to produce in our learners, we are analysing the linguistic components of the desired performance and isolating its units. We are then teaching the units piece by piece so as to get back to the very position from which we started[6]. The process of synthesis that is required of the learner is itself based on the results of a prior analysis on the part of the course-book writer. This is true not only of the lexical but also of the grammatical content of language learning. Historically, intensive discussion of grammatical selection and grading is a more recent development, but most writers and methodologists would agree that the grammatical component is central in foreign language learning and in synthetic approaches it is the organization of the grammatical content that provides the essential structure for courses and syllabuses. Each unit of learning usually focusses on some particular aspect of grammatical structure and, whether or not this is made explicit, teachers themselves will usually identify an individual unit by means of some grammatical label.

The vocabulary that is chosen for inclusion in a general language course is only a small proportion of the total lexicon of the language. The process of selection therefore is no less important than that of ordering. With the grammar the position is rather different. The ultimate goal of a general course will be to teach virtually the whole of the grammatical system. Whereas limitation will be necessary in the case of courses of short duration or of those having as a goal some kind of restricted language competence, the problems faced in determining the grammatical content of general courses are more those of *staging* and *sequencing*[7]. By what criteria does one decide which grammatical structures will have to be taught at certain stages and how they will have been sequenced in relation to one another within each stage?

---

[6] D.A.Reibel: Language learning analysis. IRAL 7/4 1969.

[7] For a lengthier discussion of these terms see: M.A.K.Halliday, A.McIntosh and P.D.Strevens: *Op. Cit.* pp. 207–212.

The linguistic criteria that are most often cited in relation to the grammatical content of teaching are *simplicity, regularity, frequency* and *contrastive difficulty*[8]. There is no particular difficulty in understanding any of these concepts. It is suggested that more *simple* language should be taught before more complex on the not unreasonable assumption that simplicity of structure implies ease of acquisition. Judgements of simplicity are still made on a largely intuitive basis, since linguistics has not yet provided us with a means of measuring complexity which has proven psycholinguistic validity. The criterion of *regularity* requires that the most productive linguistic structures should be taught before those of low productivity. The reason why the content of the early stages of so many courses is similar is that they deal with those linguistic forms that have the greatest generalizability and whatever type of linguistic description has been used to derive the language content, the same, basic facts are likely to emerge. Some grammatical forms are so necessary to any use of the language that they can only be avoided in the early stages of a course at the cost of the greatest artificiality. The criterion of *frequency* is rarely used at all rigidly. It is more often simply a matter of deferring to a later stage the learning of forms that are evidently obscure or rarely used. A great deal has been written on the subject of *constrastive difficulty.* Most of it, however, remains at the level of description and there is very little discussion of how our understanding of particular contrastive problems influences the detail of course and syllabus design. In general it is suggested that the early stages of learning should be devoted to language forms which present the fewest contrastive difficulties.

Other criteria once again involve the interaction with pedagogic considerations. If it is intended that new language forms should be presented in a context of day-to-day language use, forms which have special *social utility* or *probability of occurrence* are likely to be

---

[8]The works by Lee, Mackey and the Institut National Pédagogique cited above also include discussion of criteria of grammatical selection and grading. Most books on methodology also contain some discussion, e.g.

J.A.Bright and G.P.McGregor: *Teaching English as a Second Language.* London. Longman. 1970.

C.C.Fries: *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language.* Ann Arbor. University of Michigan. 1947.

R. Lado: *Language Teaching.* New York. McGraw-Hill. 1964.

See also:

L.Dusková and V. Urbanová: A frequency count of English tenses with application to teaching English as a foreign language, in *Prague Studies in Mathematical Linguistics.* 2. Munich. Hueber. Prague. Academia. 1967.

H.V. George: A verb-form frequency count. ELT 18/1 1963.

promoted. As with vocabulary, grammatical forms will have higher or lower priority according to their degree of *pedagogic utility*, their *appropriateness to the classroom context* and their *teachability* in the light of the methods and techniques that the teacher wishes to adopt. Most important of all is the fact that the whole of this strategy of teaching is based on the principle of working from the familiar to the unfamiliar and of using the familiar to teach the unfamiliar. The efficient teaching of one item will presuppose the prior acquisition of certain other items. The factors involved will be partly linguistic and partly pedagogic and they will result in preferred orderings of grammatical forms – what have been called *relations of recommended precedence.*[9]

One of the problems faced in selecting and grading language is that the various lexical and grammatical criteria conflict with one another as often as they complement one another and there is no way in which weightings can be given to them. A highly desirable lexical item may cause grammatical difficulties. Productive forms may nonetheless be complex. As a result, a good deal of the decision-making remains subjective. The individual teacher, writer, syllabus-constructor will, in any given instance, have to decide for himself to which criterion he will attach the greatest importance.

The syllabus that results from the application of these criteria will be a *grammatical syllabus.* The use of a grammatical syllabus can be regarded as the conventional approach to language teaching since the majority of syllabuses and published courses have as their core an ordered list of grammatical structures. The vocabulary content is secondary in importance and certainly rarely provides the basic structure of a course. The view is widely held that until the major part of the grammatical system has been learned, the vocabulary learning load should be held down to what is pedagogically necessary and to what is desirable for the sake of ensuring adequate variety in the content of learning. From this point on, the grammatical syllabus will be regarded as the archetype of a synthetic approach to syllabus design.

3.0 Reservations about synthetic approaches

In recent years a number of arguments of varying degrees of importance and validity have been put forward for questioning the adequacy of a grammatical syllabus. It is not generally denied that

---

[9] See K.Bung: *The Specification of Objectives in a Language Learning System for Adults.* Strasbourg. Council of Europe. 1973.

what is learned through a grammatical syllabus is of value to the learner. It is rather suggested that this is not the necessary or the most effective way of designing language courses and that, in any case, language learning is not complete when the content of a grammatical syllabus has been mastered.

Reibel, in the article already referred to above, argues that the elaborate procedures of analysis leading to re-synthesis are superfluous since they aim to recreate the very language behaviour that was the starting-point of the analysis. In that case, he says, why not base language learning directly on the language corpus from which the analysis was derived? There are ways of exploiting the language found in a corpus that could lead to effective learning. However the analysis that underlies a grammatical syllabus is not often in practice based on an identifiable corpus. It is more likely to be based on existing descriptions of the language and on what, by common consent, course producers have actually included in language learning materials and syllabuses. If one shares Reibel's view, therefore, how does one choose the corpus of authentic language material on which the learning is to be based? The time available for learning is short and it does not seem reasonable to suggest that a random exposure to language will suffice. The issue of selection will still have to be faced and if one does not want to use criteria that stem from grammatical descriptions of the language, others will have to be used in their place.

One danger in basing a course on a systematic presentation of the elements of linguistic structure is that forms will tend to be taught because they are there, rather than for the value which they will have for the learner. Sometimes irregular verbs are introduced for the sake of completeness even where they are likely to be of little use to the learner. However this is a criticism of actual syllabuses not of grammatical syllabuses in principle, since the proper operation of the criteria listed above should prevent this kind of thing occurring. The danger is greatest where learners require the language for some restricted purpose. If the content is planned with general linguistic considerations in mind and with inadequate attention paid to the grammatical (and lexical) characteristics of the language performance implicit in the learners' objectives, much time may be spent in the acquisition of language that is at best marginally relevant and too little time on forms that are of particular value to this group of learners. In a word, learning will be inefficient.

One characteristic of grammatical syllabuses, a characteristic that is also found in some kinds of teaching material, is that what has to be learned is identified as a form and rarely as a set of meanings. Most syllabuses are in fact an inventory of grammatical forms. It is very rare

for grammatical meanings also to be specified. The assumption seems to be that form and meaning are in a one-to-one relation, so that the meaning to be learned in association with a particular grammatical form would be self-evident. In practice, language is not like that. A single grammatical form may be semantically quite complex. The learning of grammatical meaning needs to be planned no less than the learning of grammatical forms. If this is not done, it will tend to be assumed that learning is complete when there is mastery of the formal devices or when a partial semantic interpretation can be put upon a form. In materials themselves learning of form is sometimes adequately provided for, but the learning of meaning is neglected. This kind of criticism can be met without abandoning the framework of a grammatical syllabus.

A greater difficulty and one to which there is not an obvious answer lies in the fact that the syllabus is an ordered list of structures. If the content is expressed by use of grammatical terminology, units will be identified by such labels as *the definite article, the past tense, transitive sentences, adverbs of frequency, the order of adjectives, the comparative* and so on. Alternatively the content might be expressed through examples, or, most likely of all, through both. The items that are identified in this way are only rarely syntactic structures like *transitive sentences* or *the order of adjectives* above. More often they are items which contrast paradigmatically with other items in the syllabus and which may well be morphologically distinct. By this I mean that the definite article contrasts with the indefinite article and the past tense with the present tense. Each of these is a term in a grammatical system and the total number of terms is limited. It is possible to learn all the terms of a system and the exact relationship between them. Success in learning the grammar of a foreign language is usually measured in terms of the degree of mastery over paradigmatic systems of this sort.

Although these systems are listed exhaustively in a syllabus, the syntactic structures in which they occur in the language are not. Of course the fundamental facts of syntax are almost inevitably taught, but there remains a good deal that is not. Let us take an example. In the unit labelled *comparative* the learner will learn such facts as that *older* is in contrast with *old* and *oldest.* He will learn that this is a typical comparative formation and that certain other adjectives form their comparatives differently. He will also learn that a comparative adjective co-occurs with *than* and he will probably practise the comparative through syntactic structures like *John is older than Peter.* What the syllabus or the course will never do, either at this point or at a later stage, is make it clear that the comparative occurs in